

## An experiment in access

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### Resumo

O Museu Petrie do University College, em Londres, tem desenvolvido de forma intensa os estudos de públicos, quer do ponto de vista qualitativo quer quantitativo. O principal objectivo dos estudos realizados prende-se com as novas formas de apresentação das colecções a públicos sucessivamente mais alargados. A exposição itinerante 'Ancient Egypt: Digging for Dreams', aqui descrita, constitui uma dessas experiências. Apresentada em Londres e em Glasgow, esta singular exposição desencadeou reacções interessantes, quer por parte do público em geral quer por parte da academia. Este artigo reflecte sobre essas reacções e suas implicações no contexto de um museu universitário.

### Abstract

The Petrie Museum has conducted significant quantitative and qualitative research with academic audiences and with the general public, and is experimenting with new ways of presenting its collections to address a broader audience. 'Ancient Egypt: Digging for Dreams' is one such experiment - a travelling exhibition of objects from the collection showing at public galleries in London and Glasgow. This paper looks at public and academic responses to the exhibition and some of the issues these raise for the university museum.

### Introduction

'Ancient Egypt: Digging for Dreams' is a touring exhibition created by a university museum in partnership with two local authority museums. One aim of this collaboration is to bring university collections to a wider audience. Public reaction to this exhibition to date has been overwhelmingly positive: the academic response equivocal. This paper describes the exhibition, summarises the reactions to it, and examines some more general

issues for university museums seeking to broaden their audiences.

### Collections

The Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology<sup>1</sup> is just over a century old. It is part of University College London (UCL), was founded, along with its Egyptology Department, in 1893, and takes its name from the first professor, Flinders Petrie (1853-1942).

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. [www.petrie.ucl.ac.uk/](http://www.petrie.ucl.ac.uk/).

The collection grew rapidly over the next seventy years, through Petrie's annual excavations in Egypt, and those of his students and successors. It now numbers around 80,000 objects, and is one of the largest and best-documented collections of Egyptian archaeology in the world, illustrating life in the Nile valley from Palaeolithic times to the 20<sup>th</sup> century CE. The museum is full of objects of great public interest, including vast quantities of artefacts used in daily life in the ancient world (costume, jewellery, writing materials, tools); funerary material (the world's largest collection of Roman period mummy portraits); and important archaeological groups, such as the artistic productions from Akhenaten's city at Amarna. Despite the collection's popular appeal, it was always intended primarily to support the teaching of Egyptian archaeology, and it includes encyclopaedic type collections to help students learn to date finds (MacDONALD 2000).

## Audiences

For most of its history, the museum has been known to and used by a select academic audience; around 300 visitors a year are listed in the visitors' books. During the 1980s the audience began to expand to include interested laypeople, a Friends organisation was set up and by the late 1990s numbers had increased to 3,000 a year. At this point the university took the decision to alter the management of the museum. A new structure was created for management of collections throughout UCL, and within the Petrie Museum a managerial post was created, one of the main tasks of which was to broaden the museum's audience. At around the same time, the museum's collections

were designated by the UK government as being of national importance. Designation brought both new funding and with it the responsibility to begin to serve a national audience.

For the Petrie Museum, as for many other outstanding university-owned collections<sup>2</sup> now deemed to be nationally significant, designation presents a great challenge. Staffing and revenue budgets have been so low that services even to internal academic audiences are arguably inadequate and many would deride the idea that such museums could operate as national centres of excellence.

On top of this, the Petrie Museum operates, as do many university museums, from a dramatically inaccessible site, its unprepossessing surroundings effectively establishing its low profile and limited audience. It is situated on the first floor of a university library building off a goods yard, on top of a boiler. Signage is almost non-existent and visitors from the real world must negotiate a security gate, delivery vans and a library turnstile, before encountering displays that assume a specialist knowledge of Egyptology. On Saturdays during vacation there is no lift access to the displays, and the museum will shortly be in breach of legislation relating to disability access. Those people who do manage to find the museum are overwhelmed with a sense of achievement and discovery.

Without a substantially increased marketing budget or a new site the potential for increasing audiences to the museum itself is negligible. The challenge of increasing audiences is particularly acute in a subject as polarised as Egyptology. There can be few areas of

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<sup>2</sup> There are fifteen at the time of writing; a full list can be found at [www.resource.gov.uk/designation/mus\\_index.html](http://www.resource.gov.uk/designation/mus_index.html).

ancient or modern history that hold such broad popular appeal, yet within academia, some have suggested that its very popularity gives Egyptology a dubious status as a rigorous intellectual discipline (ROTH 1998). Market research carried out by the Petrie Museum with existing and potential users has confirmed the existence of this rather unhelpful divide (MACDONALD & SHAW 2000).

In view of its potentially wide audience yet restricted site, the museum has focussed on outreach, both digital and physical, as a means of widening access to its collections (MACDONALD *et al.* 2001). Designation funding from the government is enabling the creation of a complete, illustrated online catalogue of the collections by 2002. This digital catalogue, and a sister project to create digital resources for higher education, should significantly increase and enhance use of the collections by students, academic and other researchers, schools and the general public. The exhibition described here is the physical counterpart to these virtual initiatives, although of necessity it is more selective and more evidently constructed.

Late in 2000, just after the exhibition opened, plans began to evolve for the Petrie Museum to move to a new, greatly expanded and more accessible site. This development has in a way rendered the exhibition more significant as a test bed for interaction with a broader audience.

## Aims

The exhibition 'Ancient Egypt: Digging for Dreams' is the result of a three-way partnership between the Petrie Museum and two local authority-run museum services, one in Croydon (south of London) and one in Glasgow. The partnership was based on personal

discussions, which took place during 1998 thanks to long-standing friendships between the heads of service at the three museums. The other salient element was the availability of external funding; the UK's Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) had recently launched an Access Fund designed, amongst other things, to promote the touring of designated collections. A trusting partnership and the availability of external financial support were crucial enabling factors.

The partners each had their own access-related reasons for wanting the tour to work, and there was extensive debate about individual objectives. The overall aims of the exhibition were agreed to be:

- 1) To improve public access to high quality objects from a little known designated collection;
- 2) To develop new audiences for the museums participating in the tour:
  - a) Petrie Museum: targeting both non-specialists and academic audiences, with a view to developing ideas and methodologies for communication on a new site;
  - b) Croydon Museum Service: targeting specific audiences, particularly families with children under 8, and local Black people, in line with its long term plans;
  - c) Burrell Collection, Glasgow: traditionally a tourist honeypot, but now targeting Glaswegians, particularly those in areas of multiple deprivation close to the museum;
- 3) To test new approaches in presenting Egyptian archaeology to a wider audience;
- 4) To encourage public debate on current approaches to presentation of Egyptian material in British museums.

We at the Petrie Museum felt that it was important for the exhibition to have academic credibility as well as popular appeal. We initially had some difficulty finding an academic who was keen to engage with the interests of a broad audience, and with the kinds of issues the partners had already defined, but in Dominic Montserrat we found an enthusiastic curator. He, with help from the exhibition partners, Rachel Hasted (Croydon), Simon Eccles (Glasgow) and myself, chose the themes, selected the content and wrote the text of the exhibition. Axiom Design Partnership shaped its physical form.

## Themes

The exhibition includes around 120 ancient objects, and many more modern artefacts and props. The first

section deals with Western stereotypes and common assumptions about ancient Egypt, many of which have their roots in popular fiction. Visitors can use torches to examine ancient objects, some of which are fakes, laid out in a fictional tomb setting. Later sections discuss Flinders Petrie and his achievements, but set in the context of 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century archaeology as a colonial project. The exhibition goes on to question the uses to which archaeology can be put; mummy portraits such as those excavated by Petrie, and displayed in the exhibition, were used by the Nazis to support arguments about racial types. The main part of the exhibition raises a number of questions about the ancient Egyptians, the most contentious of which centred on race and colour. These issues are normally shunned by academics as racist and irrelevant, but our market research had indicated they were live



Fig. 1 – Visitors using torches to examine ancient, modern and faked artefacts in the fantasy archaeology display at the start of 'Ancient Egypt: Digging for Dreams' (Photo © Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology).

debates for general audiences. A further section displays human remains, respectfully (we hoped) under a shroud, and invites visitors to comment – on postcards – on whether dead people should be exhibited in public. The final section of the show, ‘Consuming Egypt’, comments on how ancient Egypt is marketed and commodified in Western society. Throughout the exhibition, interpretation includes many voices, including ‘alternative’ viewpoints, and ancient artefacts are deliberately juxtaposed with modern ones, to provoke questions about how we use the past. So, by comparison with most Egyptological exhibitions it was self-conscious, reflective, and provocative. This was noted by one reviewer comparing three recent exhibitions (NEW HERITAGE 2001).

The exhibition was the main communication vehicle, supported with a range of publications (free handlist, cheap souvenir guide, website, teacher’s pack), schools handling collection, and wide-ranging events, outreach and marketing programmes at each venue. In December 2000, coinciding with the exhibition’s Croydon showing, UCL’s Institute of Archaeology organised a conference, ‘Encounters with Ancient Egypt’, which examined, amongst other issues, museum presentations of Egyptian collections. This offered an opportunity for an academic audience to consider the themes and treatments used in the exhibition.

Each venue has organised extensive outreach programmes to reach target audiences. Croydon employed a development worker to encourage young people, particularly those from African and African Caribbean cultures, to visit the exhibition. The outreach worker contacted relevant groups – including homework clubs, youth clubs, scouts groups and refugee associations – visited group leaders and then the groups themselves. She describes “generally

just making conversations about history, culture etc, to hear their views. This enabled me to mention the exhibition and the African history behind it, and to discuss their views on this” (HARRIS 2000). She then organised visits to the exhibition, with informal workshops where young people could discuss their responses. She was helped in her work by media coverage of the exhibition in the Black newspaper *New Nation*, which gave the project credibility. For Croydon this outreach work provided an important network to build on in future projects, for the Petrie Museum an opportunity to bring the collection to an audience that may never visit the museum itself.

Glasgow Museum Service has commissioned a community arts organisation, Impact Arts, to organise a varied programme of events – including art and storytelling workshops, street theatre and adult education lectures – and to make links with disadvantaged target groups in social inclusion partnership areas. Groups are visited, offered a free workshop, free transport and crèche facilities where necessary. Both venues have therefore tailored their outreach packages and methods to local audiences.

## Responses

Evaluation of this project is ongoing, and the comments here are based on results from the Croydon venue only. Simply in terms of visitor numbers the exhibition has already fulfilled its brief. Over 60,000 people have visited the exhibition in around 7 months, while in the same period the Petrie Museum has attracted only 5,000 visitors. This is despite the fact that both venues made an entrance charge (with concessions and free times) while admission to the Petrie Museum is free. Box office statistics at Croydon suggested a huge increase, as compared to previous exhibitions, in the

numbers of children and young people visiting the exhibition. Ethnicity was not measured in visitor surveys, but staff observed a higher proportion of Black families than the venue usually attracts.

Self-completion visitor surveys at Croydon suggested that 49% of visitors were spending 1-2 hours in the exhibition; a very long time for what is quite a small show, with 6% returning for a further visit. A face-to-face survey (CAMERON & HASTED 2000) asked whether they had ever seen other exhibitions on ancient Egypt. 56% had, although only 11% of these had visited the Petrie Museum. Visitors were asked what they expected to find; most wanted a general introduction to the subject, but almost a quarter had no specific expectations. The most popular features of the exhibition appear to have been the opportunity to come into contact with ancient artefacts, closely followed by general interpretation and design. When asked what they didn't like about the exhibition, 49% of visitors were reluctant to criticise, but several features of the interpretation – particularly the display of human remains – were a source of surprise.

This display, and the nearby display of postcards soliciting visitor comments, seems to have stimulated debate and discussion to a degree we had not expected. Hundreds of visitors, most of them children, have contributed their thoughts and feelings. So far they are roughly evenly divided in favour and against the display of dead people. The following comments give an indication of the level of debate:

"Children are not drawing away from this exhibit. Conversely they are viewing it then talking about it."

"The young girl in the case will live on in our memories thanks to your decision to show her remains."

"If it was my mummy I wode not like other people to see her over and over again. I wode like to see her in private" (Nadine, aged 7).

The method of display, behind a shroud, which leaves the decision to look or not to look to the individual visitor, has attracted comment in the museological press (VASWANI 2001). In other respects, however, the exhibition has been less successful in stimulating professional debate. The comments of academic visitors to the exhibition from the 'Encounters' conference were solicited via email, and only 15 responses were received, though over 60 delegates had visited the exhibition. While most of those who responded were positive about the show, several were uncomfortable with the inclusion of heterodox views:

"Very interesting and amusing, but I do not like so much the admission of alternative Egyptology."

"Very politically correct."

Anecdotal evidence from discussion with Friends of the Petrie Museum suggests that some were likewise uncomfortable with the exhibition's inclusive approach, more than one feeling that the subject had been "dumbed down" for a popular audience. Many made the decision not to visit, on the basis that they would learn nothing from an exhibition of this kind, despite the fact that – on the most basic level – many of the objects on show are normally kept in store. The exhibition's curator was disappointed by the lack of peer response and coverage in Egyptological journals. Is this (lack of) reaction due to the fact that the exhibition criticises the discipline in a public context? Or is it because the exhibition positions itself too firmly as being for general audiences? Or is it because the exhibition is in fact of no interest to specialists?

Although Petrie Museum leaflets have been displayed at both exhibition venues, our perception is – we have not surveyed our visitors to this effect – that few people have been encouraged by the show to make a first visit to the museum. I recently witnessed one who had made

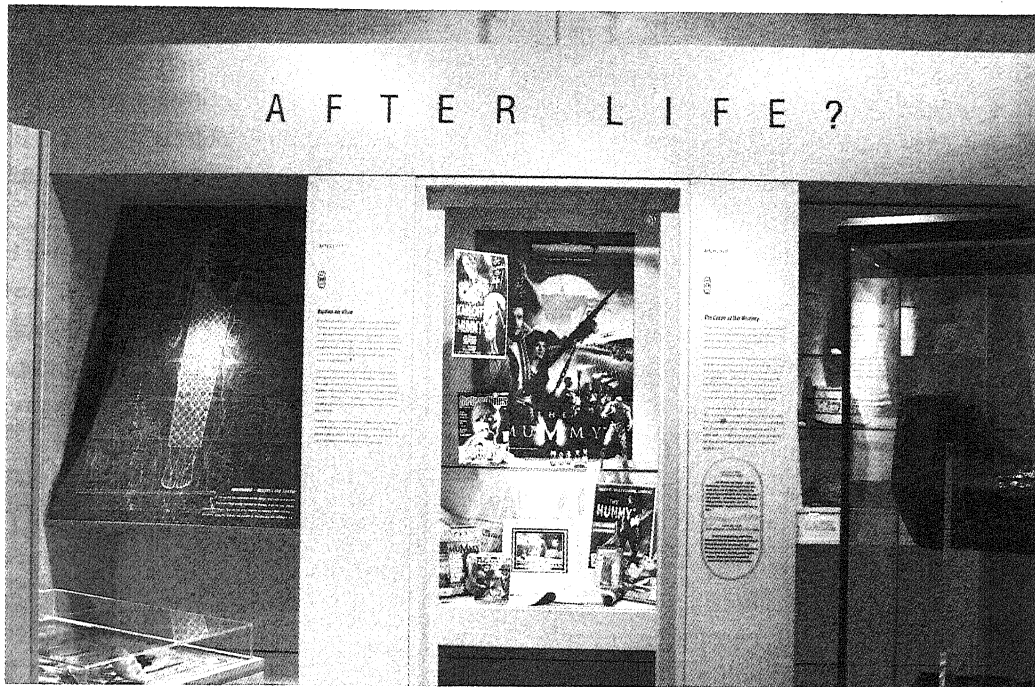


Fig. 2 – The exhibition raised questions about our uses of the past, looking at popular mythologies as well as academic views. Here human remains are displayed under a shroud on the left, with space nearby for visitor comments (Photo © Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology).

the trip stay only 10 minutes. He enthused about the touring exhibition, but clearly found the museum's displays bewildering by comparison.

So although the exhibition is clearly succeeding in some of its aims – reaching new audiences, testing new approaches to presenting the subject matter, stimulating public debate – it has been largely ignored by academic Egyptology, and has clearly failed to engage some of our core supporters. It appears not to be achieving the crossover we had hoped for between academic and new audiences.

## Lessons

I should like to end this paper – which is an interim report rather than a summary – by offering some

reflections that may be of relevance to other university museums seeking to broaden their audiences.

- 1) Know your strengths. Many university museums are in a position to share amazing collections, coupled with scholarship, that local museums – and even some national museums – simply cannot access. On the other hand, few university museums have the experience and local knowledge to make their collections meaningful to non-specialists, particularly non-museum goers. Most of us do not have time to forge these links. Rather than attempting to replicate what others can do better, we should consider working together with institutions that

already have the contacts and skills we lack, providing access at arms length.

- 2) Work in partnership but choose your partners carefully. We chose friends and colleagues we trusted, that we knew were like-minded, and whose motives coincided with our own.
- 3) Try to involve academic colleagues as much as is practical. We failed in this for several reasons. We were working to a tight deadline and were conscious that our colleagues were busy. But had we involved more of them in the planning and execution we might have managed to create a show that appealed more directly to traditional audiences.
- 4) Be prepared for criticism. Not all subjects are as polarised as Egyptology but in many disciplines you will encounter people violently opposed to “dumbing down”, and who believe that university museums are

fundamentally for academic audiences. Some of this criticism may be quite uninformed - academics are often more used to dealing with texts, not objects – but if it is from close colleagues can nevertheless be upsetting and damaging.

- 5) Be confident in your expertise. We in university museums tend to undersell our skills as communicators. Like good popular books or TV documentaries, university museums select, edit and present new academic research and ideas for a wider audience.

Experiment. Universities are generally receptive – much more so than local councils, or national museums – to controversy, freedom of thought, and experimentation, provided it is evaluated and the results shared. Take advantage of this. Take risks, make mistakes and share them.

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